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# Assignment's assessment and management of university students via e-mail

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## Abstract

E-mail is a means of online teaching that has prospered recently in universities. There is a short term background of using E-mail for assignments' management and assessment. In this study, I investigated different dimensions of E-mail applicability and usefulness for assessing assignments and its strengths and weaknesses among new students. With this intention, I based my case study on 158 students in three courses and one professor during a semester. By monitoring case studies and observing self reporting checklists I investigated the behaviours of students and their E-mails. The results showed that speed of transmission and giving feedback is much higher than other current methods. Possibility of electronic search for assignments, giving feedback to students without time and place restriction, group feedbacks and guidance, and reinforcements of teaching – learning in informal times are advantages of using E-mail as a tool for assignment management. However, using E-mail has some limitations, too. Restricting communication to writing, prolonged individual feedbacks, repetitive E-mails, misunderstanding and technical problems among new students are weaknesses of using e-mail for assessing assignments. At the end I'll offer some recommendations to make E-mail an effective means for assignment assessment.

*Keywords:* E-mail, assessment, assignment, online teaching, university

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## 1. Introduction

E-mail has prospered as an online teaching tool in recent years. However, professors have little information on its strengths, weaknesses and efficiency. E-mail is a popular non-synchronic tool that online educators can use as a means of communication means in classrooms. E-mail provides not only a sense of connectedness in students, but also offers the ability for convenient and quick information transfer (Roberson & Klotz, 2002). Therefore, E-mail is a proper tool for guiding, getting Internet addresses, sending and forwarding assignments, and giving feedback to students. There has been little research on E-mail as an assessment tool. All of these researches were performed after 2000.

E-mail is a fast, cheap and popular teaching tool in universities. Rahman, Anwar and Numan (2008) believe that using E-mail in educational environments have resulted in increased educational achievements among students. Clegg, McManus, Smith and Todd (2006) have studied fresh social science students and discovered that E-mail can be used for improving peer learning. In Hassini's viewpoint (2006) educators that use E-mail during teaching can lead their

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students to more rich experiments. Peek Peek, et al. (2007) believe that by making group E-mails we can develop social links among students. In this case, group assignments can be operated via group E-mails. The quantity and quality of social vigour in E-mail correspondence depends on resuming such experiences in the real world. Thus, group assignments via E-mail should continue in decision making in the real world (Alpay, 2005). Furthermore, using E-mail in classrooms has some other benefits, too; among these are developing writing and language skills (Shang,2007; Absalom, Pais Marden , 2004).

As well as teaching and learning, E-mail can be used to manage and assess assignments (especially in formative assessment during a term). Crossouard and Pryor (2009) argue that formative assessment via E-mail enrich feedbacks and learning motives among doctoral students. There is insufficient research about using E-mail in assessment. The goals of this study are as follows:

- To compare Time of preparation, sending and giving feedback via E-mail with ordinary methods.
- To study the strengths and weaknesses of E-mail in assignment assessment during term, from student and lecturer perspectives.

## 2. Methodology

In this research, by observing the case studies, I examined sending, receiving, giving feedback and assessment of student assignment via E-mail. I recorded time, work dimensions and problems of assignment assessment during sending and receiving E-mails. The assignment was to translate an English paper about online teaching. At the end, students should have typed and sent their translated papers to the lecturer. Apart from an automatic response that acted as a receipt, students were receiving a feedback illustrating whether their assignment was accepted or not. At the earliest opportunity, conclusive feedbacks were sent to students by the lecturer. The time for sending assignments was 9 weeks. For gathering information about strengths and weaknesses of E-mail correspondence a self report checklist was separately prepared for the students and the lecturer to be completed during their use of E-mails.

The sample size of research was 150 students of educational management (88 students), chemistry teacher training (32 students) and Physics teacher training (38 students) courses and a lecturer of teaching methods.

## 3. Data Analysis

The data for the research results are presented in the following table:

Table 1. The data for sending and receiving E-mails (during a term by a lecturer)					
Received E-mails	Non- automatic Sent E-mails	automatically sent E- mails	illegible E-mails with technical problem	repetitive E-mails	Total
410 E	273 E	410 E	12 E	125 E	1230 E
%100	%10	%97	%33/33	%22	%33/33

As illustrated, in table (1) some automatic responses were given to students' E-mails with this title: ((I received your message. At the first time I will assess your assignment. Thank You)) (column 3).

Column 5 shows that some students have sent 125 repetitive E-mails for reassurance. All in all, 1230 E-mails were transferred during a term. In addition, some E-mails hadn't arrived in lecturer's E-mail Box either because of technical problems or the inaptitude of beginner students.

Table 2. Comparing time of preparation, sending and giving feedback for Managing Assignment via E-mail with ordinary method

Types of assignments	Chemistry teacher training			Physics teacher training			Educational management		
	mean			mean			mean		
	Time of preparing	Time of sending	Time of Giving feedback	Time of preparing	Time of sending	Time of Giving feedback	Time of preparing	Time of sending	Time of Giving feedback
Online	8 hours	6 minutes	24 hours	8 hours	6 minutes	24 hours	8 hours	6 minutes	24 hours
Ordinary method	8 hours	40 minutes	-	8 hours	35 minutes	-	8 hours	44 minutes	-

The above table, makes plain the time in preparing assignments via E-mail and ordinary methods are the same, but sending assignment via E-mail takes much less time than ordinary methods.

Sending individual and group feedbacks by the lecturer via E-mail was possible. In 24 hours the lecturer responded to students whether their assignments were accepted or not. This was followed by the students implementing any recommendations and revisions to correct their assignment.

Table 3. The frequency of receiving assignments by the lecturer during of term

Time	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Extra Time 10	total
receiving assignments	0	0	1	3	12	25	37	41	29	10	158
Percent	%0	%0	%63	%1/90	%7/6	%15/82	%23/41	%25/94	%18/35	%6/33	%100

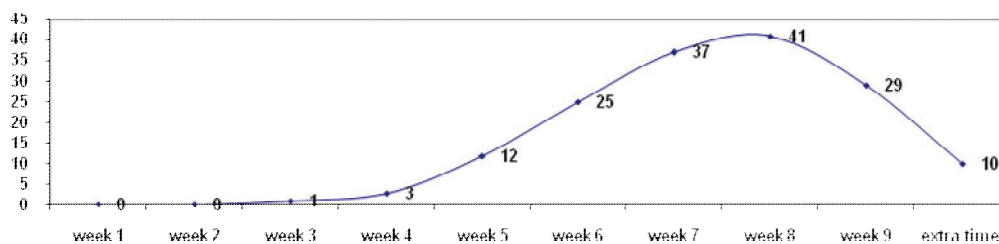


Diagram 1. The frequency of receiving assignments by the lecturer

Table (3) and diagram (1) illustrate that until the sixth week students submitted just 25/95 percent of assignments to the lecturer. Lack of time balance in sending assignments to the lecturer caused him pressure in assessing assignments in the final weeks (week 6 to 9). Work and time compression in final weeks decreased assessment and management efficiency of the assignments. Below I have analyzed the time consumed for assessing assignments by the lecturer:

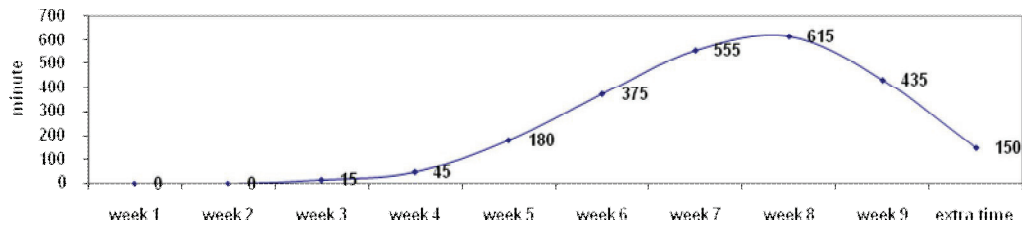


Diagram 2. Consumed time for sending message and giving feedback by lecturer

In diagram (2) time consumed for assessing a four-page paper in which the corrections are made by red ink and some general guidance are given in green ink. As we see in diagram (2), whereas at the beginning weeks lecturer spent no time, at the final weeks he should spend much time and energy for assessing assignments. For example, in the eighth week he had to assess assignments for ten hours and fifteen minutes in a week.

During 9 weeks of the total assessment the lecturer needs to work for 2370 minutes or 39/5 hour in a term. This time is just for assessing assignments, the lecturer also has to spend some time for illegible and repetitive E-mails or the ones with technical problems. Therefore we need to add these instances to the total time.

Table 4. Total consumed time for assessing and managing assignments (During a term with 158 students)

Consumed time for assessing	Consumed time for reverting and revising	Consumed time for Sending automatic E-mails	Consumed time for E-mails with technical problem and illegible ones	Consumed time for Repetitive E-mails	Total time
158 E	525 E	410 E	12 E	125 E	1230 E
2370 M	1050 M	10 M	36 M	250 M	3716 M

Table (5) shows that total consumed time for receiving, assessing, giving feedback and other extra works is 3716 minutes or 62 hours during a term which is 23/5 minutes for each student. Assessing assignment for a student via E-mail is equal to ordinary methods, but acquired results are not similar and learning time is more than that for ordinary methods.

The lecturer can spend more time especially in informal time of learning and teaching.

Below I have analyzed the results of self report checklists that were completed by students and the lecturer during the term.

Table 5. The results of lecturer's self report checklist on strengths and weaknesses of Assessing via E-mail

row	strengths of E-mail	Weaknesses of E-mail
1	Recording of assignments based on receiving time.	There are no opportunities for resolving misunderstandings occurred in written communications.
2	The ability to give both collective and personal feedback by E-mails.	Lack of balance in receiving assignments during of term.
3	Possibility of electronic search for assignments based on date and student's names.	Working via E-mail is difficult for beginner students.
4	Non-simultaneity is a characteristic of E-mail that makes connection possible without time and space	Students do not continually check their E-mails during 24 hours.

limitation.

5	Economy in printing and binding for paperless connections.	Some of students do not have continuous access to computer.
6	Assessing assignments without space limitation.	E-mail is not suitable for subjects that have much heterogeneous assignments.
7	Using internet links for additional guidance and direction of students.	Making several E-mails for various classes by a lecturer increases time and energy needed for assessing and managing assignments.
8	Developing writing skills among students.	Making one E-mail for various classes causes information conflict.
9	Making group E-mail for guiding all students in a little time.	Writing a formal mail with a salutation and other formalities for providing guidance takes more time than oral style.
10	Possibility of sending automatic messages for guidance.	Beginner students send repetitive messages and face technical problems in making and sending E-mails.
11	Possibility of pictorial connection with students and giving more information about them via Yahoo Profile.	Misunderstands in E-mail correspondences happen frequently.
12	Possibility of synchronic connection and chatting with students via Yahoo Messenger.	Accustoming students in the early sessions to connect via E-mail is troublesome.
13	Connoisseur Students do not like non-synchronic characteristic of E-mail. They think E-mail is tedious so they prefer chat and video conference.	Emotional communication via E-mail is scarce.
14	Ability for sending attachments with various formats via E-mail for instance: PDF, Word, JPEG, PowerPoint, etc.	-

Table 6. Results of students' self report checklist on strengths and weaknesses of Assessing via E-mail

row	strengths of E-mail	Weaknesses of E-mail
1	Sending assignments very quickly to the lecturer.	Receiving feedback with delay.
2	Sense of novelty in E-mail connections	Lack of visual communication
3	Certain of keeping a record of assignment in our E-mail box and lecturer's E-mail box.	Inability in correcting errors after sending the assignment.
4	Sending assignments via E-mail is very cheap.	Difficulties in sending large files.
5	Sending assignments without time and space limitation.	Being unfamiliar with all aspects of E-mail in classrooms.
6	Receiving personal feedbacks from the lecturer.	Beginner students have many problems with operating and sending E-mails.
7	Learning outside the class is possible.	Limiting E-mail connection to one or two times during a term.
8	Easily sending copies of our assignment to consult with classmates.	Taking Oral and face to face guidance is better than guiding via E-mail.

9	Unlimited Archive of assignments in E-mail box.	First experience of E-mail assessment is stressful.
10	Fast Search of assignments in records.	Students who have computer skills achieve better scores.
11	Connecting via E-mail in classroom leads to outdoor and real world communication.	Students that have sent their assignments sooner have got better scores.
12	Students who could not attend the classroom or were confined to hospital had better experience in preparing and sending their assignment via E-mail.	-
13	Sending assignments via E-mail give us a sense of freedom, speed, and relief.	-
14	Modifying assignments does not need printing	-

#### 4. Conclusion

There are so many advantages of E-mail as a learning tool. The viewpoints of students and lecturers that have worked with E-mail in formal and informal situations are positive. They believe that the strength of E-mail is that it maintains an easy and efficient communication between the lecturer and students (Roberson and Klots, 2002).

A sense of inability in learning environments can cause low educational achievements and decrease the quality of learning. E-mail correspondences provide suitable, strong and popular communicational contexts for sending and receiving messages, its non-synchronic characteristic is also a factor for easy and simple planning which does not cause any conflict between students' and the lecturer's programs (Thorsen, 2003).

In this research, the results show that the time for preparing assignments by students in E-mail and ordinary methods is the same, but the time for sending assignments via E-mail is much shorter than ordinary methods. Moreover, students do not have time and space limitation for sending and receiving E-mails. By using E-mail, there is the possibility of giving individual and group feedbacks in informal times, too.

In ordinary methods, because of time limitation for formal hours of education, there is no opportunity for individual feedbacks. One important problem with assessing assignments via E-mail is that there is no equal time balance for sending assignments during the term; this causes a rush in managing assignments. Total time for receiving, sending and giving feedback via E-mail during a term with 158 students is 62 hours. This is 23/5 minutes for each student. Therefore, time consumed in E-mail and ordinary methods are almost equal, however, there is more freedom in action and quality of work assessment via E-mail. By providing some softwares like Outlook user management increases.

Almost all formats like JPEG, Word, html, PDF etc. can be attached and sent by E-mail; by chatting we can also solve misunderstandings. E-mail is usually free or has a low cost and there is the possibility of continual membership. E-mail correspondences increase writing skills in essence (Debard and Guidara, 2000; Thorsen, 2003). Writing assignments and letters provides a chance to exercise our writing and to think about others' writings, too. Moreover, E-mail answers are more refined than oral ones. In each response via E-mail the average words used are 106, whereas in oral response it is 12 words in a message (Debard and Guidara, 2000). In this search, by pursuing the study, the results showed that 62 students from 158 students were encouraged to use E-mail for guidance and learning in scientific and social activities.

Online Assessment via E-mail has some limitations, too. Working with computers for the lecturer is more tedious than live communication. For instance, saving addresses, searching and recalling E-mails, writing responses and feedbacks and attaching files need much time. Online courses should be designed in such a way that would take less of lecturer time and energy than ordinary and non-online courses. On the other hand, if the lecturer does not response to student E-mails and does not give feedbacks to them in an organized manner, students would become impatient (Woods and Keeler, 2001).

One deficiency of E-mail correspondences are misunderstandings that might happen. This occurs because it is a non- synchronic and virtual communication (Suler, 2004). Using emoticons can be a factor in avoiding

misunderstandings and to enriching emotional relations among users during sending and receiving E-mails (Kato, Kato and Scott, 2009).

#### 4.1. Recommendations for using E-mail in Assessing Assignments

- Start each course by introducing the technical structure of E-mails. Prepare materials for assignments and a blueprint to complete it.
  - If possible give feedbacks to students within 24 hours, otherwise use automatic messages.
  - If you have misunderstandings in dealing with assignments use telephone contact. Calling students can be useful in strengthening connections and informing each other in communicating.
- While giving feedbacks, use group E-mails instead of individual ones.
- Try to deliver assignments by the middle of the term; do not postpone it to the end of the term.
- Instruct and encourage students to connect with their classmates and other specialists via E-mail to enrich their assignments.
- Allocate a code and a name to each classroom and set it in your E-mail address. If the assignments are common in several classrooms setting up one E-mail account is sufficient.
- Persuade your students to have a friendly discussion in informal times. Making a discussion forum on the net can help them to learn how to negotiate about their assignments.

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